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ABSTRACT

Two papers examine perceptions about gifted students. In the first, studies related to labeling gifted children are reviewed. The report cites the uncertain nature of the results and the differing opinions about labeling. A brief overview of the evolution of labeling theory as an outgrowth of social deviance theory is also included. The second paper reports a study of 161 teachers' attitudes related to attributions they made about gifted students in their classroom. Four attributions (ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck) were explored along with 10 affects (anger, pride, satisfaction, gratitude, disappointment, surprise, guilt, unhappiness, pleasure, and happiness). Preliminary results suggested that the label of gifted by itself does not appear to operate in any significant way unless it appears in conjunction with other student characteristics such as motivation. (CL)

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Labeling: Social Deviance as a Metaphor for Intellectual Precocity

Teacher Perceptions of Gifted Students in the Classroom

Ann Robinson

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LABELING: SOCIAL DEVIANCE AS A METAPHOR FOR INTELLECTUAL PRECOCITY

By

Ann Robinson
Western Illinois University

National Association for Gifted Children
Annual Convention, St. Louis, Missouri, 1984

Special Presentation: Members of the Research Committee

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With the growing visibilty of gifted programs in schools and the rising number of parents seeking services for their children, admonitiions about the effects of labeling are increasingly found in the literature. Clark (1979) warns that labeling may harm the child because it sets up expectations. Others question the morality of labeling some children gifted. By implication, they argue, all unlabeled children are not gifted and are, therefore, inferior (Myers and Ridl, 1981). Shiva-Sapon (1984) questions the ethics of a society that labels a select few and provides special opportunities for the elite. Fenstermacher (1982) maintains that only when we have completely served the mainstream do we have the right to turn our attention to the gifted. It appears that educators cconcerned about the effects of lbaeling children gifted fall into two general categories: 1). those who are concerned for the welfare of the gifted child and 2). those who question specialized treatment for the gifted child. Many opinions are expressed: few are accompanied by empirical evidence. There is a paucity of systematic research on the effects of labeling children gifted.

Three studies address the issue directly. In a study which investigated the perceptions gifted students have about themselves, Guskin et al. (1983) found that high achieving adolescents attending university programs for the gifted perceived themselves and gifted students in general favorably. When asked to identify the causes for their giftedness, the majority of the subjects reported that with hard work and motivation anyone could be specially able or skilled. In addition, these gifted adolescents reported negative treatment from others in only 14% of the responses. Guskin et al. (1983) concluded that these results conflicted with speculations that gifted students are rejected by others, notably their peers.

The issue of labeling can also be investigated from the perspective of the labeled child. Robinson (1983) investigated teachers' paper grading practices and found no significant differences when comparing labeled and nonlabeled conditions. Pre-service teachers did not systematically rank a child's paper either higher or lower because he was labeled gifted.

Finally, in addition to the effects of labeling in an educational setting, at least one study (Cornell, 1983) examined the impact of labeling on the family. Results are mixed, but parents who perceived their child as gifted were prouder of their child and described a closer relationship with the child than parents who did not perceive their child as gifted. In families with non-gifted siblings, those siblings were significantly less well adjusted than other non-gifted children.

It is interesting to speculate about the uncertain nature of the results and the differing opinions about labeling. Gallagher

(1979) has suggested that our egalitarian society respects the individual who succeeds but suspects persons who may be viewed as elite, even if their favored status is a function of their talents. We are ambivalent about the label of gifted.

Further, it is revealing to trace labeling theory back to its antecedents. Labeling theory was an outgrowth of social deviance theory (Becker, 1963). Becker studied marijuana users and jazz musicians in Chicago and developed his theory based on these groups. People are deviant because their behavior departs from the norm the rest of society has established and because they have accepted the label. According to Guskin et al (1983), other researchers applied Becker's theory to the study of the mentally ill and the physically disabled. Subsequently, it was translated as labeling theory and used to examine mentally retarded populations (Mercer, 1973). Perhaps a theory which had its origins in the study of the handicapped, marijuana users, and jazz musicians is not easily mapped on to the study of the gifted. Further labeling studies may lead us to specify which aspects of social deviance are an appropriate metaphor for intellectual precocity and which are not.

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Teacher Perceptions of Gifted Students in the Classroom

by

Ann Robinson

Western Illinois University

Presentation to the Annual Convention of the NAGC
National Association for the Gifted
NAGC Committee on Research and Evaluation
Denver, Colorado, November, 1985

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Teachers form expectancies (predictions, ideas) about the students in their classrooms(Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). These expectancies are formed in part by a student's current performance or behavior in the classroom. Teacher expectancies may also be affected by background information given to teachers(Safran, Safran, & Orlansky, 1982) and by other student characteristics. For example, in the case of gifted students, current classroom performance is generally high unless the child is an underachiever. In addition, teachers often have some notion of student characteristics and background because the gifted child has been identified in order to receive special services (i.e. labeled).

In achievement situations, teachers' expectancies are often influenced by their thinking about students' reasons for doing well or doing poorly in school. These causal explanations or attributions are one means of examining teachers' perceptions of their students. For example, when a child does well on a test, a teacher may attribute the child's success to ability (She's smart) or to effort (She tried hard) or to luck (She studied the right things) or to task difficulty (It was an easy test anyway). In addition to these causal explanations, teachers may also feel certain affects when their students succeed or fail(Weiner, 1976).

Teachers' affects or feelings about student outcomes are

considered important because ultimately they may be an indicator of a teacher's behavior toward a child(Weiner, as reported in Prawat, Byers, & Anderson, 1983). According to the attribution theorists, if teachers feel they have something to do with a child's success, they are likely to feel proud. If they feel proud, they may subsequently compliment the child. Conversely, if teachers feel responsible for the child's failure, they express guilt and consequently may try to help the child in the classroom. In contrast, when teachers assign responsibility to the child for his or her own failure, they are likely to feel gratitude or anger: gratitude if the child succeeds, anger if he fails. Attribution theory would predict that the student most likely to be a target for teacher anger is the high ability child who does not try in school.

Although the attribution framework seems a fruitful approach for investigating teacher perceptions of gifted students, the approach has been more frequently applied to special populations with a mentally retarded label(Palmer, 1980; Severance & Gasstrom, 1977). Only one attribution study of gifted students has been reported in the literature. Hanes(1979) investigated the effect of the gifted label on teacher trainees' attributions. Results indicated that trainees were more likely to attribute the success of gifted students to ability and of normal students to effort. A failing performance for normal students was attributed to task difficulty, but failure by the gifted was attributed to lack of ability and poor guess work(luck).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate teacher

affect as it relates to attributions teachers make about gifted students in their classroom. In general, it was hypothesized that teachers would feel less responsibility for the success and failure of gifted students than of average ones.

Methods

Subjects: A total of 161 teachers enrolled in graduate education courses at a moderately sized midwestern university participated in the study. Although a few of the 161 subjects were no longer in classrooms of their own (i.e. they were counselors, principles, or unemployed), subjects were primarily classroom teachers.

Manipulations: The subjects responded to one of eight scenarios describing a student labeled either as gifted or average succeeding or failing a geography test. The student was also described as putting forth effort to study for the test or as not doing so. In reponse to the scenarios, subjects rated each of four attributions and ten affects on a five point scale with 1 labeled "not at all," 3 labeled "moderately," and 5 labeled "extremely." The order of the four attributions and ten affects was randomized for each scenario.

Measures: The four attributions were those identified by Weiner(1976) as important for causal explanations of success and failure: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. The ten affects include those associated with causal attributions and considered important for understanding teachers' emotional

reactions to student success and failure: anger, pride, satisfaction, gratitude, disappointment, surprise, guilty, unhappiness, pleasure, and happiness.

Results and Discusssion

Only the preliminary results are reported here. However, one major finding of interst was that the main effect of label was significant for only one attribution, task difficulty [$F(1,153) = 10.06$; $p < .01$] and for none of the ten affects. These results would seem to confirm Tannenbaum's contention that, in and of itself, the gifted label is not negative(Tannenbaum, 1962). It gains in salience only in conjunction with other variables.

The presence of numerous two and three-way interactions bore out this supposition. For example, when considering the attributionally linked affects of pride and gratitude, the results indicate that the gifted label interacts signficantly with outcome. The increase in gratitude for success over failure is greater for average students than for the gifted [$F(1,153) = 6.38$; $p < .05$]. This result is paralleled for pride; the increase in pride for students who try rather than for students who do not is greater for average students than for the the gifted [$F(1,153) = 9.87$; $p < .01$]. In addition, there is a three-way interaction of label, motivation, and outcome for pride. Teachers feel prouder of the average student who succeeds with effort than of the gifted student who puts forth no effort and fails [$F(1,153) = 12.64$; $p < .01$]. In other words, it appears that the gifted label operates through either outcome

or motivation, but not alone.

In terms of guilt, also an important affect, because it has been theoretically linked with a teacher's willingness to help a child, the data do not show that the gifted label is significant. Teachers are not significantly more likely to feel guilty when a gifted child fails than when an average one does[$F(1,153 = 2.69$ $p > .10$]. A fourth affect of interest is anger. Weiner hypothesized that the high ability child who did not try would be the most likely target for teacher anger. However, the analysis found no significant differences due to label, motivation, or their interactions. The mean scores indicated that for all conditions teachers expressed little anger.

While these results do not allow one to conclude that labeling a child gifted does not affect teacher perceptions, what can be said is that the label itself does not appear to operate in any significant way unless it appears in conjunction with other student characteristics like motivation. The results of this study are in line with Robinson's earlier assertion (in press) that in order to understand teacher perceptions of the gifted child in the classroom, researchers must specify and examine other variables which interact with the gifted label.

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